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ABSTRACT

Listed are some considerations, including advantages and disadvantages, of doctoral internships in special education programs within state education agencies. Among advantages noted are that the student gains knowledge of the daily functioning of a state department while maintaining relations with his university, and that an awareness of other professionals in the field is increased; and among disadvantages reported are that the internship may increase the length of a doctoral program, and that the student may be assigned specific responsibilities without accompanying authority. (IM)

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DOCTORAL INTERNSHIPS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION VIA STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES

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Internships and practicum assignments are traditional components of educational programs at all levels and in numerous disciplines. Doctoral internships are particularly important due to their preparation prerequisites and extreme specialization. This article specifically reviews doctoral internships in programs for exceptional children within state education agencies.

Heller and Forgnone (1972) found that doctoral programs in special education should become more flexible and individualized and be based on competencies rather than on a collection of course hours. Such areas as interpersonal processes, instructional processes, and research/critical evaluation processes should be included in a doctoral training program, according to Prehm (1975). The implications for acquisition of competencies in these areas through actual experiences is apparent. In a similar manner, doctoral level competencies pertaining to teaching and advising for college professors (Ingram, 1975) could also be learned most effectively in actual situations.

Russell and Brown (1974) suggested an internship model for the training of doctoral level students in administration of special education. Such an approach would provide supervisory and administrative experiences through local education agencies responsible for serving sparsely populated areas. To complement their suggested

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model, the concept of doctoral internships in state departments of education is examined.

The purpose of a doctoral internship with a state department of education is dichotomous. In the first place, practical experience at the doctoral level in an administrative area where the student has an expressed need is provided. Secondly, the state department acquires an additional staff member at minimal cost. To minimize misunderstandings that might occur between the state education agency and the institution of higher education, a contractual agreement specifying the responsibilities of both parties is recommended.

The internship should probably last from nine to twelve months. Shorter tenures are discouraged because it generally requires a few months for the student to familiarize himself with the position. The intern must initially adapt to existing policies and regulations as well as develop an understanding of administrative responsibilities assigned to various staff members. In the selection of internships, a number of considerations warrant review.

Advantages

1. The student enjoys a unique perspective of the internal methods of operation that exist in the daily functioning of a state department, while he concurrently maintains relations with his respective university. A student pursuing a terminal degree often becomes so involved in the importance of his institution that he fails to recognize the state department

as the center of communication for the state. The role of other institutions of higher education in the state becomes more pronounced when viewed from a state education agency perspective.

2. Due to relatively inexpensive salary costs on the part of the state department for the intern, other expenses such as travel and secretarial assistance may be easier to justify. These factors may prove to be invaluable to the student by affording him the opportunity to receive some assistance in the mechanics of writing his dissertation.
3. An awareness of other professionals in the field is increased. The various conferences and workshops the intern attends and sponsors provide a broad spectrum of social and professional experiences, at the state, local, and federal levels. The bulk of communication that passes through the state department reinforces this contention. As a result of these contacts, an expansion of employment possibilities occurs at the conclusion of the student's tenure.
4. The internship provides the student with the opportunity to develop and implement innovative ideas. If his idea does not work, he can always claim to still be in training and if an idea does have merit, he demonstrates promise as a student.
5. The student is in a unique position of being able to offer both formal and informal third party evaluations of state department programs without being subject to many of the controls exercised on the other personnel.

6. The student is exposed to a wide variety of administrative logistics, including, but not limited to, conducting workshops, budgeting, data accumulation, handbook preparation, letter writing, program and media evaluation, and research.

Disadvantages

1. An internship may increase the length of a doctoral program. However, this will probably be an asset to the student if he has a deficiency in administrative experience and would like to seek employment in this area.
2. In some instances, the student may be assigned specific responsibilities without accompanying authority. Support of the state director will assist in reducing negative implications of this situation.
3. Because the intern will not usually be paid a full salary, he and his family may be required to make certain financial sacrifices. However, a doctoral degree is not a degree of convenience and the student must be willing to "pay the price" as a part of his total investment.
4. The intern must overcome the stigma that may be initially attached to his role as a student. This could be more severe if the intern should have a relatively weak personality. The intern should utilize every available opportunity to demonstrate responsibility and willingness to contribute, especially in the early stages. If he does follow a strong student, he should make every effort to be his own person and not attempt to walk in the footsteps of his predecessor.

Other Considerations

1. Depending on the background and personality of the intern, a decision must be made by the chairman of his committee and/or the state director to assign the intern to work under the supervision of a relatively strong or weak staff member. A strong staff member who perhaps already possesses a terminal degree could lend specific expertise and direction that might not be otherwise available. The primary advantage of working with a weak staff member is more personal responsibility and decision making opportunities. The intern may prove to be an unexpected asset by assuming direct assignments and assisting other staff members in their work. The possibility of alternating supervisors either from one staff section to another, or exchanging interns with a neighboring state department at the end of an arbitrary period of time, should not be ignored.

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